

*Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023*

**Remarks Honoring Martin Luther King, Jr., in Atlanta, Georgia**  
*January 15, 2023*

*The President.* Can you all hear me? Oh! I've spoken before parliaments, kings, queens, leaders of the world. I've been doing this for a long time, but this is intimidating following. [Laughter] You all are incredible.

I—and let's lay one thing to rest. I may be a practicing Catholic—we used to go to 7:30 mass every morning, in high school and going into college, before I went to the Black church. [Laughter] Not a joke. Andy knows this.

Andy, it's so great to see you, man. You're one of the greatest we've ever had. You really are, Andy. Andy and I took on apartheid in South Africa and a whole lot else. They didn't want to see him coming. [Laughter]

But we used to—that's where we'd organize to march to desegregate the city. My State was, like yours, segregated by law. We were a slave State, to our great shame. And we had a lot of leftovers of the bad things that come from that period of time. But I—at any rate, that's another time. [Laughter] But I learned a lot.

And I promise, if any preacher preached to me back then, I'm not going to be nearly as long as you were. [Laughter] Actually, I have a bad reputation for speaking too long.

He followed the path of Moses, a leader of inspiration, calling on the people not to be afraid and to always, always, as my grandfather would say, "keep the faith." He followed the path of Joseph. A believer in dreams, in the divinity they carry, in the promise they hold. And like John the Baptist, he prepared us for the greater hope ahead, one who came to bear witness to the light.

Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was a nonviolent warrior for justice who followed the word and the way of His Lord and His Savior. On this day of remembrance, we gather at Dr. King's cherished Ebenezer. I say—I emphasize the word "cherished" Ebenezer. And by the way, Sis: Every good man, every good brother needs a really strong, strong sister. You think I'm kidding. I'm no Dr. King, and my sister is not you, but I'll tell you what: She's smarter, better looking, and a better person than I am. [Laughter] Managed all my campaigns.

Folks, you know, on this day of remembrance, as we gather here at this cherished Ebenezer to commemorate what would have been Dr. King's 94th birthday, we gather to contemplate his moral vision and to commit ourselves to his path—to his path. The path that leads to the "Beloved Community," to the sacred place and that sacred hour when justice rains down like waters and righteousness was a mighty stream.

Folks, to the King family, I know no matter how many years pass—it doesn't matter how many years pass—those days of remembrance are difficult. They bring everything back as if it happened yesterday. It's hard for you.

And I want to thank the King family—presumptuous of me to do this, but, on behalf of the whole congregation—for being willing to do this year in and year out, because you give so much—so much—to the rest of us. And we love you all. We love you all.

To fully honor Dr. King, we have to pay tribute to Mrs. Coretta Scott King, who we dearly miss. She led the movement that created the King holiday and so much more. In my view, this day is her day as well.

And to Raphael Warnock—reverend, doctor, Senator—congratulations on your historic victory. A fellow Morehouse man. I've come to know a lot of Morehouse men. *[Laughter]* That old saying, "You can't tell them much." *[Laughter]* But I tell you what, we've set up, for the first time ever at the White House, a Divine Nine committee. It's active every day. And I watch how the other graduates pick on the Morehouse men.

You stand in Dr. King's pulpit, and you carry on his purpose. And this service doesn't stop at the church door. It didn't with Dr. King, it doesn't with you, and it doesn't with the vast majority of you standing—sitting before me.

I want to thank you for the honor of inviting me to be call to America's—"America's freedom church".

And thank you to this congregation and to all the distinguished guests, elected and unelected officials that are here today who've done so much over so many years. And so many young people are going to do so much more than we were able to do.

What's your name honey?

*[At this point, the President addressed a young girl in the congregation.]*

Well, it's good to see you. Maybe I can have a picture with you when I—before I leave, okay? Is that all right?

*Audience members. Aww.*

*The President.* I say this with all sincerity: I stand here humbled being the first sitting President of the United States to have an opportunity to speak at Ebenezer Sunday service. You've been around for 136 years. I know I look like it, but I haven't. *[Laughter]*

I'm God-fearing thanks to my parents and to the nuns and priests who taught me in school, but I am no preacher. But I've tried to walk my faith, as all of you have.

I stand here inspired by the preacher who was one of my only political heroes. I've been saying—and Andy's heard me say it for years—I have two political heroes my entire life when I started off as a 22-year-old kid in the East Side as—in the civil rights movement, and got elected to the United States Senate when I was 29. I wasn't old enough to take office.

And I had two heroes: Bobby Kennedy—I admired John Kennedy, but I could never picture him at my kitchen table, but I could Bobby—and, no malarkey, Dr. King. Dr. King.

And the fact is that, you know, I stand here at a critical juncture for the United States and the world, in my view. We're at a what I—some of my colleagues are tired of hearing me saying—but we're at what we call an "inflection point," one of those points in world history where what happens in the last few years and will happen in the next 6 or 8 years, they're going to determine what the world looks like for the next 30 to 40 years.

It happened after World War II. It's happening again. The world is changing. There's much at stake. Much at stake. And you know, the fact is that this is the time of choosing. This is the time of choosing direct choices we have.

Are we a people who will choose democracy over autocracy? Couldn't ask that question 15 years ago. Everyone thought democracy was settled. Not for African Americans. But democracy, as an institutional structure, was settled. But it's not. It's not.

We have to choose a community over chaos. Are we the people who are going to choose love over hate? These are the vital questions of our time and the reason why I'm here as your President. I believe Dr. King's life and legacy show us the way we should pay attention. I really do.

Dr. Martin Luther King was born into a nation where segregation was a tragic fact of life. He had every reason to believe, as others of the generation did, that history had already been written, that the division would be America's destiny. But he rejected that outcome. He heard Micah's command to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly.

And so, often, when people hear about Dr. King, people think of his ministry and the movement, or most about the epic struggle for civil rights and voting rights. But we do well to remember that his mission was something even deeper. It was spiritual. It was moral.

The goal of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which Dr. King led, stated it clearly and boldly, and it must be repeated again, now: to redeem the soul of America. I'm not joking. To redeem the soul of America.

What is the soul of America? Easy to say, but what is the soul of America? Well, the soul is the breath, the life, the essence of who we are. The soul makes us "us."

The soul of America is embodied in the sacred proposition that we're all created equal in the image of God. That was the sacred proposition for which Dr. King gave his life. It was a sacred proposition rooted in Scripture and enshrined in the Declaration of Independence. A sacred proposition he invoked on that day in 1963 when he told my generation about his dream, a dream in which we're all entitled to be treated with—my father's favorite word—dignity and respect. A dream in which we all deserve liberty and justice. And it is still the task of our time to make that dream a reality, because it's not there yet.

To make Dr. King's vision tangible, to match the words of the preachers and the poets with our deeds, as the Bible teaches us, we must be doers of the Word. Doers of the Word. The battle for the soul of this Nation is perennial. It's a constant struggle. It's a constant struggle between hope and fear, kindness and cruelty, justice and injustice against those who traffic in racism, extremism, and insurrection; a battle fought on battlefields and bridges, from courthouses and ballot boxes, to pulpits and protests.

And at our best, the American promise wins out. At our best, we hear and heed the injunctions of the Lord and the whispers of the angels. But I don't need to tell you that we're not always at our best. We're fallible. We fail and fall. But faith and history teach us that, however dark the night, joy cometh in the morning.

And that joy comes with the commandments of Scripture: "Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, all thy mind, and all thy soul." And "Love thy neighbor as thy self." Easy to say. Easy to say. But very hard to do.

But in that commandment, in my view, lies the essence of the gospel and the essence of the American promise. It's when we see each other as neighbors and not enemies that progress and justice come. It's when we see each other as fellow human beings and as children of God, that we bend—begin to walk the path of Dr. King's "Beloved Community." A path his dream inspired and whose legacy propel us forward to this day.

Here's what I learned in my life and in my career along that path, as many of you have learned along your path: We're all imperfect beings. We don't know where and what fate will deliver to us, and when. But we do—we can do our best to seek a life of light and hope and love and, yes, truth. Truth.

That's what I try to do every day to build the future that we all want, while reminding ourselves that nothing—nothing—is guaranteed in our democracy. Nothing. Every generation is required to keep it, defend it, protect it, to be repairers of the breach, and to remember that the power to redeem the soul of America lies where it always has lie—lay: in the hands of "We the People." "We the People."

I was vividly reminded of that truth on the South Lawn of the White House. I believe you were there, both of you—both your Senators—on the South Lawn of the White House with our Vice President, Kamala Harris, and hearing these words, and I quote: "It took just one generation from segregation to the Supreme Court of the United States." End of quote. Those are the words of Kejan—Ketanji Jrown [Brown; White House correction] Jackson, our Supreme Court Justice.

It took just one generation, from segregation to the Supreme Court of the United States. And as I told folks at the time: She's smarter than you are.

As Dr. King said, "Give us the ballot, and we will place judges on the bench . . . who will do justly." And we are. That's the promise of America, where change is hard, but necessary.

*[The President coughed.]*

Excuse me.

Progress is never easy, but it's always possible. And things do get better on our march toward a more perfect Union.

But at this inflection point, we know there's a lot of work that has to continue on economic justice, civil rights, voting rights, on protecting our democracy, and on remembering that our job is to redeem the soul of America.

Look, I get accused of being an inveterate optimist. I call that the "Irish of it." *[Laughter]* We're never on top, always stepped on. But we are optimistic, like Dr. King was optimistic.

Folks, as I said, progress is never easy, but redeeming the soul of the country is absolutely essential. I doubt whether any of us would've thought, even in Dr. King's time, that the—literally, the institutional structures of this country might collapse—like we're seeing in Brazil, we're seeing in other parts of the world.

Folks, I'll close with this—with a blessing I see today. In the Oval Office—and many of you have been there, been there in my office—you get to set it up the way you want, within reason. As I sit at my desk—

*Audience member. [Inaudible]—Mr. President! [Laughter]*

*The President.* As I sit at my desk and look at the fireplace, just to the left is the bust of Dr. King. It's there, in that spot, on purpose. Because he was my inspiration as a kid. He does know where we should go.

I ran for three reasons. I said I wanted to restore the soul of America. I wanted to rebuild this country from the bottom up and the middle out. And I wanted to unite it.

And not far from him, if you look about 40, 50 degrees to the right, there is another statue, another bust—of Rosa Parks. People ask me, "Why?" I say—and I put in my words—she'd just say, "I've had enough." I've had enough.

Folks, I often think of the question that Dr. King asked us all those years ago. I think it's important. You all remember, but I think it's important the Nation remember it. He said, "Where do we go from here?" That's a quote. Where do we go from here?

Well, my message to the Nation on this day is: We go forward, we go together—when we choose democracy over autocracy, a beloved community over chaos; when we choose believers and the dreams, to be doers, to be unafraid, always keeping the faith.

Every time I'd walk out of my Irish Catholic grandfather's home up in Scranton, Pennsylvania—his name was Ambrose Finnegan—and he'd yell, "Joey, keep the faith." And my

grandmother: "No, Joey. Spread it. Spread the faith." [*Laughter*] No, I'm serious. It's a Catholic Rosary I have on my wrist—the one my son had on the day—the night he was dying.

The point is, there's hope. There's always hope. We have to believe. And, ladies and gentlemen, that was Dr. King's path, in my view—the path of keeping the faith—and it must be our path.

Folks, for God's sake, this is the United States of America. The United States. There's nothing beyond our capacity—nothing beyond our capacity—if we set our mind to it. And, ladies and gentlemen, we're a land of dreamers and a land of doers. Nothing is beyond our capacity.

And the gospel song that Dr. King loved, as I understand or they always told he did: "We've come too far from where we started. Nobody told me that the road would be easy. I don't believe He brought me this far to leave me." He did not bring me this far to leave me.

My fellow Americans, I don't think the Lord brought us this far to leave us. I really don't. My word. And, my fellow Americans, God bless Dr. Martin Luther King and his family. And based on his—one of his favorite hymns, "Precious Lord, take my hand through the storm, through the night, [and] lead me on to the light."

May God bless you all. And let's go find the light. We can do this. I mean it.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:45 a.m. at Ebenezer Baptist Church. In his remarks, he referred to former U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations and former Southern Christian Leadership Conference Executive Director Andrew J. Young, Jr.; Christine King Farris, sister of Dr. King; and Sen. T. Jonathan Ossoff. He also referred to his sister Valerie Biden Owens. This transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on January 16.

*Categories:* Addresses and Remarks : Martin Luther King, Jr., remarks honoring in Atlanta, GA.

*Locations:* Atlanta, GA.

*Names:* Farris, Christine King; Harris, Kamala D.; Jackson, Ketanji Brown; Ossoff, T. Jonathan; Owens, Valerie Biden; Warnock, Raphael G.; Young, Andrew J., Jr.

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